

God calls Moses, What is God Calling You To? Message for September 3, 2017. *Based on Exodus 3:1-15*

Our story from Exodus is known as the call of Moses, God is calling Moses to rescue his people from the tyranny and slavery of the Egyptians. This story is known as a “call narrative” and call narratives are an established genre or style of writing used by biblical writers over the centuries to tell how heroes of the bible are called by God.

To say that Moses has an incredibly interesting life story, is a classic understatement! He begins life as a child of parents from the Levites, the priestly class of the Hebrew people at a time when the Hebrews, God’s chosen people are now embroiled in slavery to the Egyptians. Moses becomes the man who leads his people out of slavery, presents them with God’s 10 commandments and eventually leads them to the Promised Land. Moses is born about 4 centuries after Joseph had helped the Pharaoh save the Egyptian people from starvation. During those years, the Hebrew people have flourished in Egypt, and the new Egyptian Pharaoh finds this threatening, concerned they could potentially overpower the Egyptian people. This king no longer remembered what Joseph had done four hundred years before. And to destabilize the Hebrew population, Pharaoh orders the killing of all Hebrew male babies at birth. Moses is born during this time. Moses’ mother hides him as long as she can, then makes a waterproof basket for him, and sends him adrift into the path of the Pharaoh’s daughter at her bathing place along the Nile River, and the princess rescues him and adopts him as her own. Moses’ swift thinking sister offers to find a wet-nurse to feed the baby, who of course is Moses natural mother, thereby ensuring Moses’ entrenchment into his own people’s ways from infancy until the time when he is weaned, about 3 years of age or so. Here’s a little tid-bit I just read about this past week. The Hebrew word translated into “basket” (2:3) literally means *little ark*:¹ Now, we all know the story of Noah and how that big ark saved the people and animals that world repopulate the world, and now the story of Moses the man called by God to save God’s people, also begins in an ark, albeit a little one. I suspect this ‘little’ detail would not have been missed by the readers of this story in the original language.

The excerpt of Moses’ story that we read today’s starts with Moses just having a regular day, out shepherding his father in law’s sheep. How does Moses, raised as grandson to the Pharaoh, come to be a lowly shepherd? Well as it turns out, he may have grown up in the royal household, but he never forgot his roots as one of the people of Israel, and in a fit of rage killed an Egyptian man whom he found beating one of the Hebrew slaves—one of his own people! The Pharaoh hears of the killing, and wants Moses killed. Moses flees to the wilderness of Midian. And over time, he marries and starts a new life there, among the Midianites, distant cousins of his own people.

So that’s how we find Moses to be the shepherd of his father in law’s sheep, on Mount Horeb, “also known as Mount Sinai—(*Exodus 19.11*). In the ancient world, mountaintops were the traditional dwelling places for the divine. There on the mountain Moses encounters and unquenchable burning bush.”² -- a bush that does not burn up, it just keeps blazing away! -- admittedly not something you see every day! And so Moses goes to check it out. From the bush comes the voice of God, calling him by name. And Moses says “Here I am”. The Lord tells him he is standing on Holy Ground and so, to take off his sandals, a sign of reverence we know is still used in other religious cultures, including Islam. And God reminds Moses just in whose presence he is, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” (3:6) Moses is overwhelmed, understandably—this is not just a bush burning with an unquenchable fire, but a talking burning bush. To his credit, he doesn’t run screaming away, he stands his ground, with an awareness of who he is encountering, and instead hides his face, he is afraid to look at what he realizes is God.

¹ Chris Haslam’s commentary from <http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/archive/apr21m.shtml>. accessed Aug. 30.17

² Dennis Olson’s Commentary from https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=135 August 29, 2017

And God says to him, I have seen the misery of my people, they are oppressed, I feel their pain, hear their prayers, and you are to go to the King of Egypt and rescue them and take them to a land of milk and honey. “So come (says God) “I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”(3:10)”

I’m sure Moses’ thoughts would have gone along the line of: Me, go to Pharaoh? He ordered me killed for killing an Egyptian! And me rescue an entire nation of people? No, I don’t think so! And Moses responds: “Who am I to go to the Pharaoh?”

God knows he’s scared, it is a terrifying prospect to be sure! So God says, Don’t worry, it’s ok “I will be with you.”

Now I’m sure Moses gets to thinking, it’s pretty nice out here in the pastures, just worrying about sheep, no soldiers, no army after me. I’m not so sure about this deal God’s proposing. So he wants to figure this thing out and says to God: “How do I know that the Israelites will believe that it’s you God, who’s really sent me, how do I tell them who you are, what your name is?”

And God says to him: I AM who I AM, In Hebrew *ehyeh asher ehyeh*. Now a wee grammar lesson on God’s name. In Hebrew, the verb ‘to be’ is *hayah*, from which is derived: ‘YHWH’, which is a transliteration – the Hebrew consonants without the vowels. This in time becomes transliterated into English as ‘Yahweh’.

Now, in the NRSV (new revised standard version) of the Old Testament represents the divine name “to be” or ‘*hayah*’ as “the LORD”, all capitals, a convention used since ancient times.

And the LORD said to Moses: “Thus you shall say to the Israelites: I AM has sent you, The Lord the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” “This is my name forever and this my title for all generations.” (Ex. 3 15)

That’s where we ended our reading today, but if you read on a bit more, God gives Moses direct instructions and still Moses comes up with excuses: What if they don’t believe me? God reassures him again, his shepherd’s staff becomes a snake when he throws it on the ground and becomes a staff again when he picks it up. Moses tries another excuse. And God says put your hand in your cloak, and when Moses pulls his hand out of his cloak and it’s covered with leprosy, and puts it back in his cloak and takes it out & it’s healed.

Moses is running out of excuses. So he tries another tact: Lord, I’m no public speaker! God says, I will be with your mouth and teach you what you’re to say. So Moses takes the direct route. ‘Lord, please send someone else’, and the Lord gets angry with Moses never ending excuses (4: 14), but doesn’t give in, but instead provides another support for him: Fine, God says, your brother Aaron is a good speaker, he can go with you and be your spokesperson. And so Moses seemingly having run out of excuses and accepts the call of God. And the rest, as they say, is history.

So, who is it who is calling Moses to rescue the people? God, the one who is. The God who is of the past, the God who is the present and the God who will always be. The LORD, who is the great I AM.

God is the one who hears the people’s cries, and who responds to the people’s cries, who calls all God’s people to do God’s work in the world, and who equips and chooses people to do that work. God chose Moses, even though Moses really didn’t want to be chosen at first. And really, who better than Moses? Here was a man who had a foot in both worlds, who understood both the Egyptian ways and the Hebrew ways. And now, after many years living in the country as a shepherd among Midianites, kinfolk of the enslaved Hebrews, he had learned the ways of country-living people, thus also helping him to prepare for a cross country trek through the wilderness.

You know one thing that makes this story a ‘classic’ call narrative, it’s that God’s call came while Moses was in the midst of his daily routine, doing his regular stuff. One of my sources puts it this way: “God calls us in the ordinary experiences of our everyday lives. God’s call is not to be seen as something special or something in addition to our routine, but as something that arises from it.”³

God calls us all, in some way to service in God, as part of our day to day lives. Although admittedly, seldom does God try and get our attention with a talking burning bush! But sometimes I think a burning bush would be easier. I recall a period in my life when I first started going back to church, started on my faith journey, and was feeling frustrated because I so desperately wanted to sense God’s presence, wanted to know where God was, who Jesus was, wondered what God wanted for me and yet couldn’t feel God’s presence, or Jesus’ love. I remember praying to God: Why can’t you send me a burning bush! In retrospect, I think if I really had a burning bush experience at that time, I would have run away screaming in fright!

God knows what we need, and when we need it, and just what we can really handle. Our job, as it were, is to be aware that God is present, and can come to us at any time, any day, as part of our everyday lives. God calls all of us, seeing within us sometimes talents and abilities that we don’t see in ourselves. And when God calls on us to do something, God will be with us—no matter how many excuses we try and come up with to avoid it. Look how many times God reassures Moses, he certainly tried to finagle his way out of it! That doesn’t mean that the journey will be without risks or inherent problems, but God is with us. If it is God’s will, God always provides what is needed to do the work of God’s Kingdom.

We are all called to do God’s work, in some way or another, with whatever gifts, skills and talents God has provided us. Sometimes it takes someone else to help us to see just what that call is—and yes, we can avoid it if we want. One of the gifts God gave us all is free will—to answer God’s call or to turn away from God’s call and go our own way.

What if Moses said to God, thanks for asking Lord, but I don’t really want to take anything more on right now. My life is good, out here with the sheep. Going back to Egypt—sorry, been there done that. You know, I’m sure if you ask someone else, they’ll help you out.

As we pursue a new direction for our little church, how might God be calling you? What role does God have for you in this potential new parish arrangement, as we consider how God is calling us to mission and ministry in this new context?

How will you respond? Will you find excuses, will you turn away or simply ignore the request? Or seriously consider what God is calling you to with the time, talents and treasures God has given you. Fortunately, we’re not all called to be Moses’s!

However, the choices we make, as always, are ours. That is the gift of free will.

³ Wm Barclay, University of Brandon website, date no longer known.